Shaping transnational learning positions and understanding social work in context–students' experiences of a short-term exchange program

Yan Zhao & Hilde Berit Moen

Published online: 11 Feb 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ⧉

Article views: 465

View related articles ⧉

View Crossmark data ⧉

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Shaping transnational learning positions and understanding social work in context–students' experiences of a short-term exchange program

Yan Zhao and Hilde Berit Moen

Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Bodø, Norway

ABSTRACT

Embedded in the discussions on how the internationalization of social work education can benefit concrete social work practices, which are inevitably contextual, this study analyzed students' experiences of participating in a short-term exchange program between a Norwegian and Chinese university, and explored how they benefited from the program and international experience in terms of their professional development as social workers. The analysis builds upon data from participant observations, focus group interviews, and individual student essays. Using a transnational perspective, we argue that the exchange program with its joint teaching activities created 'transnational learning positions' through which the students developed critical reflections on the meaning of contexts in social work. The analysis demonstrates that transnational learning positions entail a process of repositioning through which the students, as learning subjects, are displaced from the familiar learning context and replaced into a position of uncertainty, which is shaped through their encounters with a different or contrasting context. This involves not only the physical encounters that result in embodied learnings of contextual differences, but also the intellectual encounters in the group discussions.

Introduction

Embedded in the ongoing discussions on how the internationalization of social work (SW) education can benefit concrete SW practices, which are inevitably contextual (Borrmann, 2021; Dominelli & Loakimidis, 2017; Lyngstad, 2013), this study analyzed students' experiences of participating in a short-term exchange program, which was part of a collaboration project (2018–2019) on SW education between a Norwegian and Chinese university. Master's students in SW from the two universities met twice, once each in Norway and China, with one week of intense joint teaching activities at both sites, which included lectures, seminars, field visits to SW institutions, and student group work, followed by group presentations in plenums. The exchange and joint teaching program aimed to help the students achieve a reflective, contextual, and intercultural understanding of SW through international exposure. Implicit in this goal was a general

CONTACT Yan Zhao   yan.zhao@nord.no   Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Postbox 1490, Bodø 8049, Norway

assumption that the internationalization of SW education does not necessarily contradict the emphasis of SW as being local and contextual (Lyngstad, 2013); instead, it can contribute to the contextual understanding of SW. However, the question that remains is how does it work in practice? In this study, we examined this question from the students' perspectives. Based on their experiences, we discuss how they benefited from the program and the international exposure with regard to their professional development as social workers.

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) has become a global trend (Teichler, 2017; De Wit & Altbach, 2021), including in the discipline of SW. As part of international SW, the internationalization of SW education has been developing in a simultaneous process where SW as a global profession strives to globalize its activities and extend its research agenda to the wider globalizing context (Borrmann et al., 2007; Borrmann, 2021; Healy & Wairire, 2014). Although the term 'internationalization' in higher education has diverse meanings—ranging from knowledge transfer/international curriculum, students/staff mobility, international partnership, and international comparative education and research, to international reputation—student mobility is the key element of IHE (Teichler, 2017). In line with this, international SW education also focuses on students' international study experience, which is believed to be a powerful learning tool that 'offers student opportunities to confront different views on human behaviour, to learn about different systems of social welfare, and see different ways to tackle social problems' (Borrmann et al., 2007, p. 12), and to develop cross-cultural adaptability and multicultural competence (Dominelli, 2003; Healy, 2001; Moorhead et al., 2021). According to Rogers et al. (1999), the general objective of international SW education is to assist students to learn, apply, and integrate SW values, knowledges, and skills through the provision of international learning experiences offered through international field placements, exchange programs, and lectures.

Due to the challenges that students can face in accessing and participating in exchange or study abroad programs, such as with financial capacity, family responsibilities, and paid employment commitments (Downey et al., 2018), there is a growing interest in short-term mobility and exchange programs (Mlcek & Bell, 2018; Moorhead et al., 2021). A recent scoping review of short-term study abroad programs in SW demonstrates that short-term programs can also offer sufficient promising educational outcomes, including enhanced learning and understanding of SW, the development of professional identity, and increased intercultural awareness (Moorhead et al., 2021). However, most study abroad programs reviewed in this study concerns students from Global North visiting and studying in regions of Global South, which may easily lead to asymmetric learning processes due to the inequal power relations between the home and host countries (Mizrahi et al., 2017). Differently, our study is based on a short-term exchange program of students from both Global North and South, visiting each other and participating in joint learning activities on both sites. In this study, we further explored the linkage between international SW education, students' exchange experience, and their professional development. Particularly, we focused on the students' collective and intercultural learning experiences, which we did by engaging with the concept of 'learning position.'

Positionality of knowledge and the learning position in social work

As SW educators, we are concerned with epistemological foundations, particularly in bridging students' own experiences and their knowledge acquisitions. Positionality of knowledge is important in this regard. The question of a researcher's positionality and its subsequent epistemological and methodological impacts have been central to feminist theorization on knowledge production (e.g. Collins PH, 2004; Haraway, 1999; Harding, 1986). Theoretical discussions started with feminist critiques of positivist conceptions of objective, universal, and value-neutral knowledges by pointing out dominant yet hidden forms of an assumed male-gaze in positivist conceptions of knowledge-making (Harding, 1986; Smith, 1987). This vital critique led to the development of feminist standpoint theories, which hold that all knowledges are produced in certain historical contexts and from within specific social positions or standpoints. Based on her postmodern critique of standpoint theories, Donna Haraway (1999) has advanced the feminist theorization on positionality of knowledge and developed the concept of 'situated knowledges.' Unlike standpoint theories, Haraway does not consider a researcher's positionality to be locked into certain fixed positions based on certain identities or self-identification; rather, positionality can be multiple and fluent, as it is always situated in a concrete research context. Drawing the parallel between knowledge production (epistemology) and knowledge consumption (pedagogy), we extend the concept of positionality of knowledge by including 'learning position.'

Learning position is the position from which students acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies. In the same manner that the researcher's positionality influences the process and outcome of the research, we argue that the learning position the students inhabit would influence the learning process and outcomes. Since positionality is not about a fixed position, but a process of positioning (Haraway, 1999; Lykke, 2008; Zhao, 2016), we believe that we as SW educators can actively help students shape certain 'learning positions' that can facilitate fruitful and reflective 'situated learning.' The positionality of learning matters because it provides a concrete space for developing reflective thinking, which is particularly important in SW education.

The tensions of international SW education and an alternative transnational approach

Despite the general trend of IHE, controversies have surrounded the internationalization of SW education, especially related to the tensions between the international (universal) and national/local (contextual) focuses, and the hegemony of the West in the internationalization of SW and SW education (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Dean, 2007; Lyngstad, 2013; Mizrahi et al., 2017; Schwarzer, 2016). Concerning the first tension, there is emphasis on the quality of education through discourses of 'international standards' on the one hand and the intrinsic feature of SW education and practices being contextual on the other hand. For example, SW practitioners worldwide often experience the clash of universal human and social rights with national citizenship, which defines access to support and services. Regarding the second tension of unequal power relations between the West and 'the rest', Yasmin Dean (2007) sharply points out that while social workers in Global South are eager to learn from Western countries, their counterparts in Global North may be eager to teach, but not always as keen to learn. Consequently, when developing international SW education programs, there is always

a need to examine whether and how international aspects of SW education can be connected to the contextual aspects of SW practice. Furthermore, in what way can we promote international SW education without reproducing otherness and hegemonic power relations? This is an ethical question for us that concerns ways to avoid reproducing a Eurocentric privilege in developing and implementing the exchange program, both at the institutional and individual levels, as regards to the collaboration of the faculties and students between the two universities.

In recent years, discussions on transnationalism (Faist, 2013; Levitt & Schiller, 2004) have also surfaced in the knowledge field of SW (e.g. Righard, 2018; Schwarzer, 2016; Withaeckx et al., 2017). Transnationalism or transnational processes emphasize the ongoing interconnection or flow of people, ideas, objects, or capital across the borders of the nation-state (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). A transnational perspective is becoming integral in SW practice, not least because of the international migration and movement of people, implying that social needs and problems that social workers are confronted with in their professional practice cannot be adequately understood and addressed when limited to a local or national context (Righard, 2018). However, as Schwarzer (2016) clarifies, while transnational exchanges of people, ideas, objects, and so on are not always related to SW, not all migrants are potential clients and not all transnational political decisions are suitable for support by SW. Rather, we need an integrated transnational perspective to 'challenge social work as a discipline and the profession, which is primarily based on unmarked national identity and stereotypes, which can function as an under-lying force in the construction of 'otherness'' (Kämmerer-Rütten et al., 2016, p. 2, see also, Righard, 2018). Evidently, such a transnational perspective in SW contains a postcolonial critique of the hegemony of Eurocentrism or 'Westernness' in global knowledge regimes, which is also juxtaposed with 'the professional imperialism' (Midgley, 1983; Righard, 2018) in SW, with the spread or export of SW from the West to 'the rest', and the ethics of this within contexts where a more indigenous, and therefore, culturally relevant frame-work is needed (Dean, 2007; Palattiyil et al., 2019). It is also a critical perspective that points to the unseen, unmarked, and unnoticed boundaries of SW (Lightman, 2012; Schwarzer, 2016). These aspects are particularly relevant to us, as we did observe in the early stage that the Chinese students who participated in our exchange program have a humble attitude of expecting to learn about the 'good' SW practices in Norway, while the Norwegian students may easily regard what they are used to as 'normal' or how things 'should' be, especially after encountering the Chinese students' humble attitude. Therefore, by adopting a transnational perspective, we intend to create a transnational learning process with a space where both groups of students can find their local experiences and knowledges equally relevant and valuable. With a transnational perspective, we thus aim to foster a decolonializing approach in SW education, and make the unmarked and unnoticed boundaries visible or substantiated for our students.

This perspective of creating transnational learning processes is incorporated in our conception of 'learning position.' While transnational learning involves a framework that deconstructs the Eurocentric privilege in the global knowledge regime and creates symmetrical relations in collective learning, the 'transnational learning position' is the space that this learning framework creates for students as learning subjects. When arguing for a 'transnational learning position,' our purpose is to stimulate the students' critical reflections on the boundaries, border-crossing, localities, and trans-localities they

can encounter in their professional practices. One of the boundaries we discuss is the nation-state and the related categories of culture and cultural differences, which the students reflected upon and deconstructed in the exchange program.

Research context and methods

In total, 10 Master's students of SW participated in the exchange program and in this study: four Norwegian and six Chinese students comprising two males and eight females. The students' ages ranged from the early 20s to early 30s. All the Chinese students, who were in their early 20s, completed their Bachelor's degree in SW and entered the Master's program immediately after. The Norwegian students were slightly older, and they had a Bachelor's degree in either SW or Child Protection and Child Welfare. In comparison with the Chinese students, they had more work experience, both in general and related to SW. One of the Norwegian students had two smaller children, whom the Chinese students had the opportunity to meet during their stay in Norway, leading to an interesting reflection among the two groups of students on differences in education systems and student life between the two countries. The data of the present study consisted mainly of four focus group (FG) interviews, participant observations during the field visits, two final workshops, and 10 individual student essays. The Chinese students visited Norway for one week in April 2019, and the Norwegian students visited China for one week in October 2019.

The content of the exchange program, including the topics of lectures, choice of SW institutions for field visits, and tasks for group work, were collectively developed by teaching staff from both involved universities, through their mutual visits the year ahead. The exchange weeks started with plenary lectures on campus on topics such as the contextual approach to SW, welfare/social security system, perspectives on social problems, and SW in the respective countries. On the second and third days, students and lecturers went for field visits to various SW institutions. In Norway, the students visited the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, a regional shelter center, and a community health and welfare center. In China, the students visited an elder care institution, two community SW service centers, a professional SW agency supporting local non-governmental organizations, and a school for children with special needs. During the field visits, the hosts conducted a tour and presentation of the SW undertaken in the respective practice fields, followed by a short seminar where the students asked questions directly to the social workers at these institutions. On day four, the students were divided into two mixed-nationality groups to discuss and solve the group work tasks centering on the meaning of the context, implementing SW in different welfare regimes, and reflecting upon experiences from the field visits. For example, the groups were asked to reflect on how SW is performed and how social problems are defined in the two countries, and whether it would be possible to transfer the SW practice from one country to the other. The group tasks, which clearly incorporate the introduced perspectives from the plenary lectures, therefore work as a guide for the students to develop their reflections. On the last day, the two groups presented the results of their group work in a collective workshop with the lecturers from both universities.

As part of participant observation, we focused on the questions/issues that were raised for discussion, and the resulting interactions that followed. We particularly noticed how the students responded to the information provided by the host institutions and their

counterparts. The researchers made detailed notes during the field visits and the workshops, and used their memory to supplement/complete these notes collectively afterwards. The participant observation helped form the interview guides.

The FG interviews were conducted with the Chinese and Norwegian students separately toward the end of each exchange week. To make it easier for the students to convey their experiences and reflections properly, the FG interviews were conducted in the students' native languages. The interviews focused on the students' experiences of the exchange week activities and student interactions, field visits, lectures, and group work. The interviews with the Chinese and Norwegian students were led by the first and second author, respectively. The FG interviews lasted 1–2 h; they were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English.

At the end of the exchange program, the students were asked to write an individual essay in English based on their experiences, where they could reflect upon their learning process in relation to either one concrete incident/event that happened during the program, or one specific aspect of the experience. The students submitted their essays one month after the exchange program, and the length of the essays was 3000–4000 words.

In both the group work and essay, we encouraged the students to draw on the introduced perspectives from the plenary lectures. We found that among the perspectives, two were particularly prominent: the contextual approach to SW and the social constructivist understanding of social problems, which the students frequently referred to in the workshop, FGs, and their essays.

The research data were analyzed using first and second cycle codes and coding (Miles et al., 2014). First cycle coding methods represent the codes initially assigned to the data. We used descriptive coding, under which labels were assigned to the data to summarize the basic topics in the students' descriptions of experiences, i.e. discussions on 'what is social work and what are social problems,' 'family and welfare systems' in the two countries and 'cultural differences.' We also used value coding and coded how the students perceived the different learning activities. Some codes were established prior to fieldwork (deductive coding); we sought descriptions of students' experiences related to the exchange program (holistic coding) and specific activities. In the second cycle coding (pattern coding), the summarized segments of data from the first cycle coding were grouped into a smaller number of categories, which represented emergent themes and explanations. In this article, we organize our findings in two parts: whether and how the students achieved a better understanding of the meaning of contexts in SW practice, and how the two groups of students communicated and accounted for 'cultural differences' in their interactions. Then, we discuss these findings in relation to the learning positions in which the students were placed.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Norwegian Data Protection Service [NSD, Project No. 742,026]. Anonymity and discretion were secured as a condition for data access. Before data collection, the students were informed that their personal information would not be collected and that the study aimed to know how they, as students, experienced the teaching activities included in the exchange weeks in China and Norway. Particularly, it was underlined that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that it would neither affect participation in the exchange program nor have any consequence for their

later studies. To distinguish their participation in the exchange program and in the research, we sent them the research participation enquiry after their participation decision for the exchange program was made. Nevertheless, all 10 students were positive to our enquiry and agreed to take part in the study.

The contextual understanding of social work

In the FG discussions, the students of both groups expressed that what they appreciated the most about the exchange program was the opportunity to observe in person how SW is practiced in a new context, and how the discussions they had with their Norwegian/Chinese peers in the group work enhanced their understanding of SW as a contextual practice.

For the Chinese students, learning about SW in the Norwegian context provided them a deeper understanding of SW theories. One student said that, during their education, they had been introduced to many 'Western' theories. However, it had always been difficult for them to form a complete picture of these theories because of a lack of empirical grounding, or because their empirical grounding was embedded only in the Chinese context, which, according to them, differs substantially from the 'Western' context. According to this student, the visit to Norway had finally provided them with such a 'Western' empirical grounding. Another student reflected upon the possible differences between SW in Norway and in the USA, which the students learned about through one of their teachers who had been a visiting scholar in the USA. The group then agreed that though they cannot talk about 'the West' as a whole and as one category, something they had formerly assumed, the empirical knowledge gained through the exchange program had provided them with a broader empirical grounding for understanding the theories.

For the Norwegian students, the exchange program contributed to a deeper understanding of the meaning of context. Beate said:

> What I gained most is no doubt the understanding of the context. We all had learned before, even in our Bachelor's, that the context is important. But when we came here [China] and when we had discussions with the Chinese students, the meaning of context became very, very clear. I remember the first discussion we had: our perceptions of social work, social problems, differed a lot. So we spent a long time discussing and clarifying the differences and the things we did not understand. It is so important to have these discussions, or else I doubt [whether] we actually would have talked about the same thing.

Another important point the Norwegian students made was that encountering a new context enabled them to reflect upon *their own context*, and thus, enhanced their understanding of the meaning of context in SW practices. Again, they emphasized the value of the group discussions, where they could explore the contextual differences observed during the field visits. Particularly, they talked about how the questions from the Chinese students 'forced' them to rethink their own context, which they somehow took for granted. One example of such a question is, 'What do you answer when someone asks you what you do as a social worker?' Anna said:

> I was taken aback by this question, as I had never thought about it. Everybody in Norway knows what social workers do, right? It is such a fundamental thing. So I was surprised and I did not know how to answer. Then you realize how different the contexts are!

Anna further reflected on this question in her essay, and wrote:

> The questions from the Chinese students about the Norwegian context are really useful, as they put forth a new line of questions and made us think twice about how the Norwegian system is organized and why it is like that. One simple question like "what do you answer when someone asks you what you do as a social worker?", can trigger a whole chain of reflection. Then you understand how social work is well integrated into people's daily life through the framework of the welfare state. This framework is important but you can easily forget it because you easily take it for granted.

Interestingly, the Chinese students also raised this question in their FG discussions. They were surprised by the fact that Norwegian students probably never encountered this question, which all of them had encountered during their internship. Like the Norwegian students, they also referred to the different contexts between the two countries to account for this difference. In addition to the different degrees of professionalization, the Chinese students discussed how this related to different models of organizing SW, which concerns the question of trust: it would be easier for social workers to gain the trust of potential service users when they are directly employed in the public sector or by the state (as is the case in Norway) than when they are employed by social organizations from which the state purchases social services (the case in China, see, Gao & Miu, 2015).

The Chinese students further said that the exchange program provided them not only with knowledges of SW in a new context, but also with new knowledges and perspectives on their own context and learning. For example, when asked what they had learned during the exchange program, Li said:

> The biggest lesson we have learned is how to look at problems outside the box. For instance, before, we would think that so-and-so is right, and that's how it is, that's normal. We would take it for granted. Our teachers often asked us to be reflective and to step outside the box when thinking about a problem, but we didn't have the sense or awareness to do so. We just couldn't. But this time, we really looked at problems by stepping outside the box. When the Norwegian students asked, we had to think about why we are in this situation, why so-and-so is normal. It might inspire us in some ways to think deeper about some of our domestic issues.

As for 'outside the box,' the box can be said to be the student's own context. More importantly, it is through the questions from the Norwegian students that the Chinese students were finally able to examine 'problems outside the box.' This stepping out of, or being displaced from one's own context, indicates a process of repositioning that the students experienced in the exchange program.

To summarize, both the Norwegian and Chinese students shared how the exchange experience made them rethink their own context, primarily through questions from their counterparts. For the Norwegian students, these questions helped them unpack the taken-for-granted contextual knowledges; for the Chinese students, the questions helped them develop new perspectives.

Discovering and deconstructing differences

In both the group work and final presentations, the students inevitably discussed the contextual differences between SW in China and Norway. On the one hand, differences were a natural part of the discussions in solving the tasks assigned to the students, where

they were invited to explore whether some of the SW practices in one context could possibly be transferred or transformed in the other context, along with reasons for why and why not. On the other hand, the discussions about differences were seldom limited to the tasks and field visits, and were often driven by the students' own interests and knowledge needs developed during the exchange program.

Several differences that the students discussed concerned different sets of family relationships and how these relationships frame the practice of care. Two examples stand out: grandparenting and mother-child relationships. The Norwegian students highlighted the example of grandparenting in the FG discussion and talked about the difficulties they encountered in explaining the grandparenting practice in Norway to their Chinese peers.

> Dina: The Chinese students just cannot understand why we did not stay with our grandparents when we were small. They do not understand, like ok, what they [our grandparents] were supposed to do if they did not take care of their grandchildren? (laughing)
>
> Anna: We spent a long time explaining that even though they did not take care of us, we are still close to them. Then I thought they understood. Then after some time, I saw Christian was still explaining this to one of the Chinese girls . . .
>
> Christian: Yes, I used the example of my grandparents. Like when I was born, they were not old, and they still had their fulltime jobs.
>
> Dina: Isn't it? They probably had many years left in their working life, right? So, this difference between China and Norway is about how the society is built up, in a way.

Grandparenting is often perceived as 'cultural practices' (Ko & Hank, 2014). What strikes us in this example is that the students have gone beyond the 'culture' to explain the differences in grandparenting through several rounds of questions and answers between the two cultural settings. In this way, the students managed to deconstruct the 'cultural differences' in grandparenting, something the Chinese students also highlighted in their presentation; that is, cultural differences are socially constructed.

In this respect, the Norwegian students also reflected upon the importance of the physical context (e.g. the population volume) in shaping the cultural patterns of the interactions, which is something they became aware of through the contrast between the two locations. For example, when reflecting upon their experience of visiting a residential community in China, they talked about being amazed by how easy it was to establish contact with the residents there and the way the social workers were received and greeted, which was quite different from what they were used to in Norway. Beate said:

> We have seen how closely people are staying with each other, not only in that community but also in the streets. The population in Chongqing city is about 10 million, right? While the population of Norway is 5 million. So, you sense this difference very well when you are here, like the background sounds of people (Dina: and the traffic!), yes, and even the smell. All these would influence how people interact. Of course, we felt very uncertain in the beginning, but we are also gradually affected by it. I think we all felt some difference after the trip to that community and thought "Oh, why can't we have something like this at home?"

The Norwegian students also had things they strived to understand concerning the cultural practices of family and family relationships in China, which center around the mother-child relationship. It was equally challenging for the Chinese students to provide good explanations in this regard. For example, when explaining why many women in China would not seek help when experiencing domestic violence, the Chinese students explained, 'If a husband and wife are fighting over disagreements, the wife is supposed to maintain the family balance and put up with it, like having to put up with it for the sake of their child.' Later, when they discussed the left-behind children in China, the Norwegian students posed a puzzling question, 'Isn't it contradictory—while the mother had to endure domestic violence for the sake of her child, she yet chooses to abandon the child with the grandparents for the sake of money (observation notes)?' The Chinese students recalled this discussion with the Norwegian students in one of the FG discussions.

Gu: We got stunned by their question because we saw it as two different issues. So, we didn't know how to explain it.

Researcher: Then what did you do?

Wang: So, we had to discuss internally to reach some kind of agreement before we could provide a good answer to them. We found out that there are so many factors behind it if we are to make them understand.

Researcher: Factors like?

Wang: Rural-urban differences, meaning of families.

Gu: And how the mother made these decisions. The decisions are not easy ones.

Researcher: What was your answer then?

Gu: Well . . . it is probably because of love that the mother does not want a divorce. If they divorce, the child is deprived of the father's love.

Wang: So, she won't leave her family.

Gu: So, she's willing to sacrifice to maintain the balance of the family. However, earning money is to give the child a better life. That's why she has to leave her child to earn money. After all, it's all about the kids.

Researcher: After you provided the answer, did they understand it, or did they think, well, it made sense?

Min: I remember them saying, 'Well, your family is really strong.' Maybe they understood that our family is a very advantageous place to exist and understood this idea of the family over the individual.

The Norwegian students, for their part, reflected upon these differences concerning the family in relation to the concepts of individualism and collectivism, since the concepts are part of their syllabus about SW in multicultural contexts. Yet, as they said, through the discussions with the Chinese students about concrete examples, they gained a better understanding of how collectivism influences individual decisions, which may help them in the future when working with populations such as migrants and their families.

Discussion: transnational learning positions, the process of repositioning, and the positionality of uncertainty

In the previous sections, we demonstrated how the students reflected upon their learning process and outcomes in relation to the understanding of context, and how they approached differences in their exploration of contextual differences. In this section, we discuss these findings in relation to the students' learning positions. If the exchange experience has shaped a different learning position for the students, in what sense can we theorize it as 'transnational'? What does a transnational learning position entail for students who participated in the project?

In this short-term exchange program, the students were supposed to learn not only from their individual experiences, but also from collective experiences, most notably through the mixed group work, which the students claimed as being the most rewarding. This experience-based model of learning implies that the students were important resources for each other. When designing the program, we sketched two learning positions for the host and guest students. We supposed that the guest students, when visiting a new context, would be in the position of a stranger, uncertain, and with diverse questions about the new context. The host students were then expected to place themselves in the position of insiders or even experts when answering questions from the guest students. That the guest students were placed in a position of uncertainty was apparent, particularly in their field visits. Many questions were raised to both the representatives of the visited organizations and the accompanying teachers. More importantly, they also brought to fore some difficult questions in the group work.

Even though the learning positions of the guest and host students were indeed different because of their different situatedness in a given context, we found that the positioning process of the students during the exchange program cannot simply be described as switching between the two learning positions of 'expert' and 'uncertain stranger' when the location of the exchange program shifted. This concerns particularly the host students' expected role of being an expert. As evinced from the findings, the 'strangers'' questions have in fact made the 'experts' uncertain. For example, the Norwegian students were taken aback by the question 'What do you answer when someone asks you what you do as a social worker?' The Chinese students, for their part, found it difficult to explain why a mother would choose to stay with a violent husband but 'abandon' their child for the sake of money. Moreover, in both locations, the questions were asked mutually in both directions. Thus, the guest students may also have received the question from the host students about their own context at home. Therefore, for both groups of students, uncertainty was generated through their encounters with a different context in which challenging questions were framed. With this uncertainty, the students had to rethink their own context, and consequently develop reflections around the meaning of the context.

In other words, encountering a new context not only happened when the students were physically placed in a new context through travel, but also occurred constantly through the questions and answers in the inter-contextual discussions. In both cases, these encounters created a position of uncertainty in which inquisitive questions were triggered, and the understandings of their own context were renewed or restructured.

Therefore, the exchange program did shape a different learning position for the students, a position in which they no longer take things for granted, especially concerning their own context. An example is when the Chinese students talked about their finally being able to look at problems 'outside the box,' which is a good illustration of a repositioning process for the students during the exchange program. As we illustrated, the position of uncertainty is not only useful for unfolding reflections on the meaning of the context, but also fruitful in deconstructing contextual differences, most notably cultural differences. It is transnational in the sense that the students have to simultaneously deal with two contexts across national borders in structuring/restructuring their knowledges around family, social structures, interactions, and their implications for SW practice.

Transnational movements of people often entail a process of displacement (Koser & Martin, 2012). However, we experience and claim that the long-distance displacement and the vast cultural contrasts between the two countries are among the key success factors in making the exchange program especially educational, because the wide contrasts to one's own context stimulate the reflexivity of both the students and social workers. Both groups of students addressed the significance of travel and the enormous contrast they physically sensed between the two locations. For example, the Norwegian students reflected upon the experience of being physically placed in a new context and how uncertainty is also an embodied reaction to the new surroundings, such as background sounds and smells. Thus, the transnational learning position entails a process of repositioning through which the students, as learning subjects, are displaced from the familiar learning context and experience uncertainty. It is featured as a position of uncertainty shaped through their encounters with a different or contrasting context. As for the physical dimension of displacement, we argue that—consistent with the feminist methodology of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1999) that emphasizes the embodied practice of seeing (sight) and knowing (insight)—the transnational learning positions entail embodied practices of learning through seeing, hearing, and smelling because of being there physically.

Related to the embodied experience of displacement, the Norwegian students said that they suddenly gained a greater understanding of the situations faced by newly arrived migrants in Norway. This, together with the example of the student's deconstruction of 'cultural differences,' imply a clearly transnational perspective in SW, which criticizes the taken-for-granted national framework with unmarked national identity and stereotypes functioning as an underlying force in the construction of 'otherness' (Righard, 2018; Schwarzer, 2016). The transnational learning position as a position of uncertainty to some extent also echoes Nazarkiewicz's (2016) perception of 'not knowing' and 'not understanding' as the basis of global mindedness in her discussion of 'culture reflexivity' and the professionalization of SW. While 'not knowing' or 'not understanding' refers to students' positionalities toward an unknown culture or context, the position of uncertainty we address also emphasizes students' situatedness toward their own context. In our project, this uncertainty was a necessary stage for the students to develop critical reflections. The students demonstrated cultural reflexivity on inquiring into the social processes behind the cultural differences rather than taking these differences for granted; hence, they were able to see the dynamics between different social institutions (e.g. the family, labor market, and welfare state) in understanding the cultural differences.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed students' experience of participating in a short-term international exchange program, and analyzed how they benefited from the experience in terms of their future professional practice, which will always be local and contextual. Inspired by feminist discussions on the positionality of knowledges, we approached our research question by focusing on the students' learning positions and situated learning that were deployed in the exchange program. In combination with a theoretical framework on transnationalism, we argue that the exchange program with the joint teaching activities created a 'transnational learning position' through which the students could rethink their own context and re-understand the meaning of cultural differences in accessing knowledges about the links between contexts and SW practices. We demonstrated in our analysis that transnational learning positions entail a process of repositioning through which the students, as learning subjects, are displaced from the familiar learning context and replaced into a position of uncertainty, which is shaped through their encounters with a different or contrasting context. This involves not only the physical encounters that result in embodied learnings of contextual differences, but also the intellectual encounters in the group discussions. This uncertainty is a prerequisite for the students to deconstruct their taken-for-granted assumptions and develop a more reflective and reflexive knowledge about the meanings of the context for their future SW practices.

As for the tensions of internationalization of SW education and emphasis on the contextual feature of SW practices, Lyngstad (2013) argued that the two aspects are not necessarily contradictory, and through a comparative approach can become 'two sides of the same coin' (p. 415). Based on our study, we argue for an alternative transnational approach to unify the two aspects of SW education and practice. This does not mean that we are opposed to the comparative approach. However, we do consider it challenging to implement the comparative approach in developing international SW education, especially in a short-term program such as ours, because the comparative approach requires the students to possess thorough and comprehensive knowledges of each context to conduct systematic and fruitful comparisons. For example, we noticed that our students sometimes conducted comparisons unwittingly, especially in the beginning of the exchange program, where they displayed some simplified, unnuanced understanding of certain aspects of Chinese/Norwegian culture. Furthermore, with a comparative approach, the students would easily approach a specific SW practice as it is. In contrast, a transnational approach can help them to focus not only on the global-local dynamics of SW practice, but also on the dynamics between SW practices and the changing contexts. Such a dynamic contextual perspective on SW practice as a constant process of doing SW, we argue, is particularly important and fruitful for students to develop their future professional practices. Finally, our study demonstrates that a short-term experience-based exchange program can also be of great value for social work students when it facilitates collective inter-contextual learning among the two groups of students. However, its fruitfulness anticipates certain stark differences between the involved SW contexts.

Limitations of the study

This exchange model has been tested only once in a specific Sino-Norwegian context. More research studies are thus needed to further explore the potential of this model in other exchange contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Notes on contributors

Yan Zhao holds a PhD degree in sociology, and she is an associate professor in social work at Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Norway. Her research area includes migration, aging and welfare, international social work, race and nation, as well as feminist and postcolonial studies.

Hilde Berit Moen holds a PhD degree in sociology, and she is an associate professor in social work at Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, Norway. Her research area is within the topics of medical sociology and health services, in particular concerning mental health, illness experiences, and eating disorders as a social phenomenon.

ORCID

Yan Zhao 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9129-2763
Hilde Berit Moen 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3358-5810

References

Askeland, G. A., & Payne, M. (2006). Social work education's cultural hegemony. *International Social Work*, *49*(6), 731–743. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872806069079

Borrmann, S. (2021). The interdependency of global social work thinking and local education: How personal experiences of social work educators influences their teaching. *Social Work Education*, 1–11. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1924662

Borrmann, S., Klassen, M., & Spatscheck, C. (2007). Social work in the international context. In S. Borrmann, M. Klassen, & C. Spatscheck (Eds.), *International social work: Social problems, cultural issues and social work education* (pp. 9–14). Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Collins PH. (2004). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual & political controversies* (pp. 103–126). Routledge.

De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021). Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, *5*(1), 28–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898

Dean, J. (2007). Finding common ground. Can the teaching of social work transcend cultural and geographical borders? In S. Borrmann, M. Klassen, & C. Spatscheck (Eds.), *International social work: Social problems, cultural issues and social work education* (pp. 135–150). Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Dominelli, L. (2003). Internationalizing social work: Introducing issues of relevance. In L. Dominelli & W. T. Bernard (Eds.), *Broadening horizons: International exchange in social work* (pp. 19–33). Routledge.

Dominelli, L., & Loakimidis, V. (2017). The local–global nexus in social work education and practice. *International Social Work*, *60*(2), 265–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872817694111

Downey, G., Gray, T., Hall, T., & Singh, M. (2018). Developing global perspectives: Responding to the state of international education in Australian universities. In Y. Hall, T. Gray, G. Downey, & M. Singh (Eds.), *The globalisation of higher education: Developing internationalised education research and practice* (pp. 3–20). Palgrave Macmillan.

Faist, T. (2013). The mobility turn: A new paradigm for the social sciences? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *36*(11), 1637–1646. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.812229

Gao, J. G., & Miu, C. Y. (2015). Social work in the making: The state and social work development in China. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *24*(1), 93–101. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12089

Haraway, D. J. (1999). Situated knowledges. In M. Biagioli (Ed.), *The science studies reader* (pp. 172–189). Routledge.

Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Cornell University Press.

Healy, L. M. (2001). *International social work: Professional action in an independent world*. Oxford Press.

Healy, L. M., & Wairire, G. G. (2014). Educating for the global agenda: Internationally relevant conceptual frameworks and knowledge for social work education. *International Social Work*, *57*(3), 235–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872813519463

Kämmerer-Rütten, U., Schleyer-Lindenmann, A., & Schwarzer, B. (2016). Part I: Theoretical perspectives. In B. Schwarzer, U. Kämmerer-Rütten, S.-L. A, Y. Wang, (Eds.), *Transnational social work and social welfare: Challenges for the social work profession* (pp. 1–3). Routledge.

Ko, P. C., & Hank, K. (2014). Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China and Korea: Findings from CHARLS and KLoSA. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *69*(4), 646–651. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbt129

Koser, K., & Martin, S. (2012). The migration-displacement nexus. In K. Koser & S. Martin (Eds.), *The migration-displacement nexus: Patterns, processes, and policies* (pp. 1–13). Berghahn Books.

Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing simultaneity. A transnational social field perspective on society. *International Migration Review*, *38*(3), 1002–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x

Lightman, E. (2012). Transnational social policy and migration. In A. S. Chambon, S. W, & C. Schweppe (Eds.), *Transnational social support* (pp. 13–29). Routledge.

Lykke, N. (2008). *Kønsforskning - En guide til feministisk teori, methodologi og skrift*. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur.

Lyngstad, R. (2013). Contextual social work and internationalizing social work education: Two sides of the same story? *Journal of Social Work*, *13*(4), 400–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017311435202

Midgley, J. (1983). *Professional imperialism: Social work in the third world*. Heinemann.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis. A methods sourcebook* (3rd edn ed.). SAGE.

Mizrahi, T., Kaufman, R., & Huss, E. (2017). Asymmetric learning in a short-term, macro oriented international students' exchange: An exploratory study. *Social Work Education*, *36*(8), 905–917. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1365830

Mlcek, S., & Bell, K. (2018). Developing global perspectives and respectful knowledge through international mobility programs. In Y. Hall, T. Gray, G. Downey, & M. Singh (Eds.), *The globalisation of higher education: Developing internationalised education research and practice* (pp. 279–290). Palgrave Macmillan.

Moorhead, B., Ivory, N., Boetto, H., & Bell, K. (2021). Short-term study abroad programmes in social work: A scoping review of the literature on learning outcomes. *Social Work Education*, 1–16. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1911985

Nazarkiewicz, K. (2016). Kulturreflexivität statt Interkulturalität? *Interculture Journal*, *15*(26), 23–32. http://www.interculture-journal.com/index.php/icj/article/view/278

Palattiyil, G., Sidhva, D., Pawar, M., Shajahan, P. K., Cox, J., & Anand, J. C. (2019). Reclaiming international social work in the context of the global agenda for social work and social development: Some critical reflections. *International Social Work*, *62*(3), 1043–1054. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872818774107

Righard, E. (2018). Conceptualising social work through the lens of transnationalism: Challenges and ways ahead. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, *8*(4), 245–253. https://doi.org/10.2478/njmr-2018-0028

Rogers, G., Collins, D., Barlow, C. (1999). *The social work practicum: A student guide*. Peacock Press.

Schwarzer, B. (2016). Transnational social work: An introduction. In B. Schwarzer, U. Kämmerer-Rütten, S.-L. A, & Y. Wang (Eds.), *Transnational social work and social welfare: Challenges for the social work profession* (pp. 4–12). Routledge.

Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Northeastern University Press.

Teichler, U. (2017). Internationalisation trends in higher education and the changing role of international student mobility. *Journal of International Mobility*, *5*(1), 177–216. https://doi.org/10.3917/jim.005.0179

Withaeckx, S., Schrooten, M., & Geldof, D. (2017). Thinking and acting globally and locally: Developing transnational social work practices in Belgium. *Transnational Social Review*, *7*(2), 143–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1317198

Zhao, Y. (2016). Exploring the interactive space of the 'outsider within': Practising feminist situated knowledge in studying transnational adoption. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *23*(2), 140–154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506814568361